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THE VARIOUS USES OF BUFFALO HAIR BY THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

By DAVID I. BUSHNELL, JR

INTRODUCTION

AT the present day it is difficult to realize that only a comparatively short time has elapsed since vast herds of buffalo roamed over the greater part of the country east of the Rocky mountains, and that they traversed the region from the Mississippi to the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge, and from the pine lands of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi to the Great Lakes on the north. Evidently wherever buffalo were to be found they were hunted by the native tribes, by whom all the parts of the animal were utilized for various purposes.

The hair or wool of the buffalo appears to have been quite extensively used by all the tribes, and especially by those living east of the Mississippi. Quantities of it were collected, later to be spun or twisted into cords of which bags, belts, and other necessary articles were braided. Although the majority of the Eastern tribes appear to have used it extensively for such purposes, yet not a single object of buffalo hair work made east of the Mississippi can be traced in America, and only a few articles exist in Europe.

Some three years ago the writer described two bags, braided of twisted cords of buffalo hair.¹ One is in the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford, the second is preserved in the British Museum, London. Both were undoubtedly made east of the Mississippi and may have been the work of some Algonquian tribe north of the Ohio. A description of these excessively rare pieces is included in the present article, thereby making it more nearly complete.

As will be seen in the following pages, the references to the use of the hair or wool of the buffalo by the native tribes of North America cover practically the entire habitat of that animal during pre-colonial days.

¹ The Use of Buffalo Hair by the North American Indians, *Mun*, III, London, 1909.

I — THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY AND EASTWARD TO THE ATLANTIC COAST

How far north in the Mississippi valley the hair or wool of the buffalo was used by the Indians is not known; but in all probability it was utilized throughout the area. However, it is evident that it was used quite extensively by the tribes farther south — from the Illinois to the Natchez.

The earliest reference to its use by the Illinois necessarily appears in Marquette's Relation.¹ When he reached the villages of the Illinois, soon after the discovery of the upper Mississippi on June 17, 1673, he entered in his journal —

“Everywhere we were presented with Belts, garters, and other articles made of the hair of bears and cattle [buffalo] dyed red, yellow, and gray. These are the only rarities they possess.”

And later, when describing certain customs of the same tribe,² he made the interesting statement that —

“when the Illinois depart to go to war, the whole village must be notified by a loud shout, which is uttered at the doors of their cabins, the night and morning before their departure. The captains are distinguished from the warriors by wearing red scarfs. These are made with considerable skill, from the hair of bears and wild cattle [buffalo].”

Hennepin unquestionably referred to either the Illinois or to some neighboring tribe to the eastward when he wrote :

“The native women (*les femmes sauvages*) spin the wool of the wild oxen and make sacks to carry the meat smoked or dried in the sun.”³

In a letter written by the Jesuit Père Gabriel Marest to Père Germon, dated at “Cascaskias [Kaskaskia] an Illinois village, Nov. 9, 1712,”⁴ occurs this reference to the wool of the buffalo :

“In addition to this [making rush mats] they are busied in working up the hair of the oxen and making it into leggings, girdles, and bags; for the oxen here are very different from those in Europe; besides having a great hump upon the back, near the shoulders, they are also wholly

¹ *Jesuit Relations*, Thwaites ed., vol. 59, p. 123.

² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³ Père Louis Hennepin, *Nouvelle découverte d'un très grand pays situé dans l'Amérique*, Utrecht, 1697, p. 190.

⁴ *Jesuit Relations*, vol. 66, p. 231.

covered with a very fine wool, which takes the place of that which our savages would obtain from sheep, if there were any in the country."

These references to the making of bags by the Illinois or neighboring tribes are of more than ordinary interest. As has already been stated, the only known examples of work in buffalo hair or wool that were undoubtedly made east of the Mississippi, are two bags belonging to English museums. In form these closely resemble the bags even now made by the Chippewa and the Winnebago, of the upper Mississippi valley and near Lake Superior; but these modern specimens are made of twine or yarn obtained from the whites.

The more interesting and valuable of the two examples is preserved in the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford. It is typically Algonquian in form; but unfortunately nothing is known of its history, when, where, or by whom it was collected.

Both sides of this bag are shown in figure 75. The dimensions of the bag are: length, about $19\frac{3}{4}$ in.; depth, not including the fringe, about $8\frac{3}{4}$ in. It is an example of braiding, not weaving, and the twisted cords extend diagonally across the surface, which makes it impossible to distinguish between the warp and the woof elements. In forming the bag, two strips, each about an inch in width and $8\frac{3}{4}$ inches in length, were made to serve as the ends to which the sides were attached. The fringe was formed by plaiting several cords extending from the lower edges of the two side-pieces. The sides were formed of the natural brown hair, while the ends, being somewhat darker, may have been dyed. The beads used in decorating the sides and ends are quite irregular in form, and are made of opaque white glass — one of the oldest varieties of trade beads used in America.

In decorating the bag the beads were not attached to the surface, as is now the general custom, but were first strung on the cord. This method is referred to by Adair; unfortunately, however, he did not specify the tribe or tribes by which the custom was practised, although he wrote of the general area east of the Mississippi and south of the Ohio. According to this writer:¹

¹ James Adair, *History of the North American Indians*, London, 1775, p. 423.

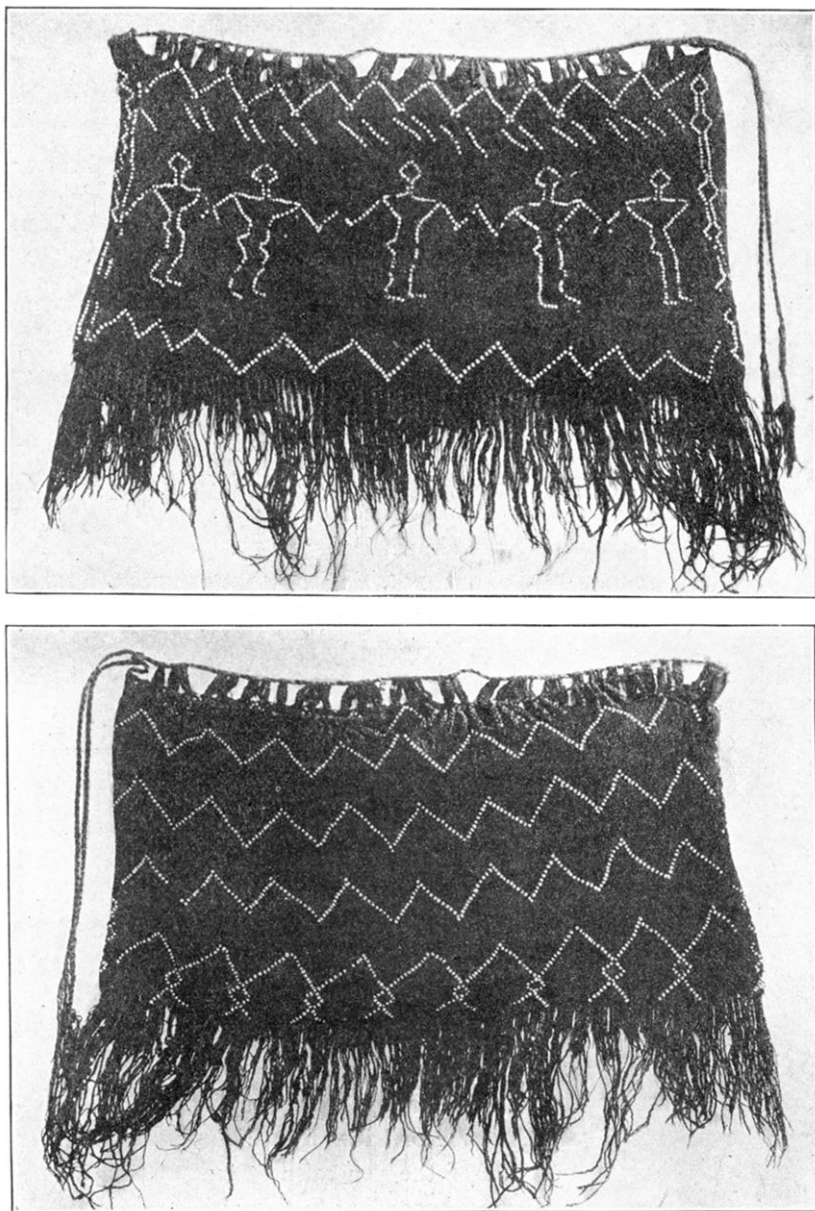


FIG. 75. — Two views of a buffalo-hair bag in the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford.

“In the winter season the women gather buffalo’s hair, a sort of coarse, brown, curled wool; and having spun it as fine as they can, and properly doubled it, they put small beads of different colours upon the yarn as they work it; the figures they work in those small webs are generally uniform, but sometimes they diversify them on both sides. The Choktah [Choctaw] weave shot-pouches, which have raised work inside and outside.”

Nine years after Père Marest wrote from Kaskaskia, Charlevoix visited that village, and in a letter there written, dated October 20, 1721, likewise referred to the art of spinning the wool of the buffalo as practised by the women of the Kaskaskia tribe.

He says in part :¹

“The women are very neat handed and industrious. They spin the wool of the buffalo which they make as fine as that of English sheep. . . . Of this they manufacture stuffs which are dyed black, yellow, or a dark red.”

A bag somewhat similar to the Pitt-Rivers specimen is in the Christie collection in the British Museum. It is braided of twisted cords of buffalo hair, decorated with similar white, opaque glass beads. The sides of this bag, however, were dyed a dark red. Very little of the color now remains, but sufficient to verify Charlevoix’s reference to “stuffs which are dyed . . . dark red,” made by the Kaskaskia. And this seems to strengthen the theory that the two bags, the one in Oxford, the other in London, were the work of the Illinois.

In several localities, either within or adjacent to the Kaskaskia or Illinois country, many fragments of large earthen pans, or shallow vessels, have been discovered in the vicinity of salt springs. Many of these fragments bear on their outer, or convex, surfaces the imprint of woven or braided fiber of varying degrees of coarseness. Some are very fine and close, while in others the impressions represent a coarse, open mesh. Although it is not possible to say definitely, it is highly probable that the cloths impressed on the pottery vessels were made of the hair of the buffalo.

Many varieties of cloth, some unusually fine, had been impressed on fragments of large pottery vessels discovered by the

¹ Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North America*, London, 1761, vol. II, p. 222.

writer near Kimmswick, Jefferson county, Missouri, during the autumn of 1902. These are now deposited partly in the Anthropological Museum of the University of California and partly in the Peabody Museum of Harvard University.¹

Examples of charred cloth recovered from mounds in Ohio exhibit the same diagonal braiding as the bags in the English museums, and it is not improbable that they are carbonized fragments of similar objects. These have already been illustrated.²

Some distance below the Kaskaskia, on the right bank of the Mississippi and not far from the mouth of the Arkansas, were the villages of the Quapaw.³ These were the *Cappas* of Joutel, by whom they were seen in 1683. Regarding the women of the tribe, he wrote thus :

"Those women have their faces still more disfigured than the others we had seen before: for they make several streaks or scars on them, whereas the others had but one. They adorn themselves with little locks of fine red hair, which they make fast to their ears, in the nature of pendants."⁴

Although, unfortunately, the sort of hair is not specified, its nature is at once suggested by the following entry in the old manuscript Catalogue of the Sloane Collection in the British Museum, written before 1750 :

"1216. The same [buffalo] hair dyed red and yellow tyed in tufts on a string as an ornament for the Carolina Indians."

Again, it has been recorded of the Southern tribes in general that :

¹ D. I. Bushnell, Jr, *Primitive Salt Making in the Mississippi Valley*. — I. *Man*, 13, London, 1907. II. *Ibid.*, 35, 1908.

² Holmes, *Prehistoric Textile Art of Eastern United States*, *Thirteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Eth.*, p. 38, pl. vii. In pl. ix are shown fragments of cloth-marked pottery from Illinois. Also in *Third Rep. Bur. Am. Eth.*, *Prehistoric Textile Fabrics*, fig. 80, p. 408, represents the impression of a similar cloth from ancient pottery discovered in Tennessee.

³ On the large map of the "Course of the River Mississippi, from the Balise to Fort Chartres . . . by Lieu! Ross of the 34th Regiment : 1765," a Kappas (Quapaw) village is located on St Francis river, near its mouth, while another settlement of the same tribe is placed about 40 miles southward, on the right bank of the Mississippi. It is not possible, however, to give the exact location of the village visited by Joutel.

⁴ Joutel's Journal, in French, *Historical Collections of Louisiana*, New York, 1846, pt. 1, p. 169.

“The women bore small holes in the lobe of their ears for their rings; but the young heroes cut a hole round almost the extremity of both their ears, which till healed, they stretch out with a large tuft of buffalo’s wool mixt with bear’s oil.”¹

In addition to the specimen mentioned above, other examples of buffalo-hair work were formerly in the Sloane collection; but not one exists at the present time. The following entries are noted in the catalogue:

“1215 A rope for tying anything. Made of the hair of the head of the American buffalo. Described by Mr Hennepin.”

“1536 A girdle made of Bufalos hair and porcupine quills.”

“1656 A pair of garters made of the same [porcupine quills] and Bufalos hair. From the same [Mr Dering of South Carolina].”

The use of the hair by the Indians of the western part of Carolina, and also the occurrence of buffalo in that region, are mentioned by Lawson, who wrote during the first decade of the eighteenth century.

“He [the buffalo] seldom appears amongst the English Inhabitants, his chief Haunt being in the Land of the Messiasippi, which is for the most part a plain Country: yet I have known some kill’d on the Hilly Part of Cape-Fair-River, they passing the Ledges of the vast Mountains from the said Messiasippi before they can come near us . . . Of the wild Bull’s skin Buff is made. The Indians cut the Skins into Quarters for the ease of their Transportation and make Beds to lie on. The[y] spin the Hair into Garters, Girdles, Sashes and the like, it being long and curled, and often of a chestnut or red Colour.”²

Buffalo were also included among the “wild beasts of the Forest” of South Carolina about 1750,³ and a few years later it was written —

“The buffalo’s are sometimes found in the mountains; but they are not near so numerous as they were a few years ago.”⁴

Consequently it is easily understood where the Carolina Indians obtained their supply of buffalo hair or wool. But this was not the

¹ Adair, op. cit., p. 171.

² Lawson, *History of Carolina*, London, 1714, p. 115.

³ *A Description of South Carolina*, London, 1761. Reprinted in the *Historical Collections of South Carolina*, compiled by B. R. Carroll, N. Y., 1836, vol. II, p. 250.

⁴ *A Short Description of the Province of South Carolina, Written in the year 1763* [by Geo. Milligen], London, 1770. Reprinted in *Hist. Coll. S. Car.*, vol. II, p. 482.

only kind of hair utilized by the women of the Carolina tribes. Lawson¹ wrote concerning them :

“The Indian womens work is to cook the Victuals for the whole Family, and to make Mats, Baskets, Girdles of Possum-Hair and such like.”

And again referring to the opossum :²

“Their Fur is not esteem'd nor used, save that the Indians spin it into Girdles and Garters.”

But we are unable to trace the use of buffalo hair among their northern neighbors, — the tribes of Virginia, — although it is difficult to believe they did not make use of it. Probably buffalo were seldom, if ever, seen in the tidewater area, occupied by the Algonquian tribes forming the Powhatan confederacy. But the Monacan, who claimed the country from the falls westward to the Blue Ridge, must necessarily have been quite familiar with the buffalo, and unquestionably made use of the various parts of the animal, as did the other tribes.

Rasaauweck, one of the principal Monacan towns, was situated in 1608 at the mouth of the Rivanna. Another town of the confederacy evidently stood on the right bank of the same stream, a few miles north of Charlottesville, Virginia. Curiously enough, we know practically nothing of this tribe, even though it was quite populous and influential during the early days of the colony.

Byrd, in describing the buffalo, said :

“The hair growing on his Head and Neck is long and Shagged, and so Soft that it will spin into Thread not unlike Mohair. . . . Some People have stockings knit of it.”³

Buffalo undoubtedly crossed the Blue Ridge from the westward and traversed the country of the Monacans. They were probably to be found among the foothills of the Alleghanies until comparatively recent time. When Albemarle county was first occupied, about 1730, “game of every kind abounded. Traces of the buffalo still remained. A trail is said to have run up Rockfish river to the

¹ Op. cit., p. 188.

² Ibid., p. 121.

³ *The Writings of Colonel William Byrd*, New York, 1901, p. 225.

gap of that name. It is also reported that the old Richard Woods road closely followed a buffalo trail. A tract of land belonging to the Webb entry, sold in 1769, and lying on the north fork of the Rivanna, is described as adjoining Buffalo Meadow."¹

Again returning to the Mississippi, we find references to the use of the hair by that most interesting of all the lower Mississippi valley tribes — the Natchez. In a letter written to Père d'Avaugour by Père le Petit, dated New Orleans, July 12, 1730, regarding certain ceremonies and human sacrifices attending the death of a Natchez chief, occurs the following allusion to the use of a cord made of buffalo hair. This suggests the entry, No. 1215, in the old Sloane catalogue, previously mentioned.

"After having danced and sung a sufficiently long time, they pass around their necks a cord of buffalo hair, with a running knot, and immediately the ministers appointed for execution of this kind come forward to strangle them."²

Another reference to the Natchez, of a different nature though of equal interest, is to be found in the work of Du Pratz, written only a few years after the letter of Père le Petit. It reads thus:

"The infant is rocked not sideways but endways and when it is a month old they put under its knees garters made of buffalo's wool which is very soft, and above the ankle bones they bind the legs with threads of the same wool for the breadth of three or four inches. And these ligatures the child wears till it is four or five years old."³

Likewise Dumont alluded to the same tribe when he said:

"They also spin, without spinning wheel or distaff, the hair, or rather wool, of the bison, of which they make garters and bands."⁴

Lastly, we have this most interesting reference to the use of the hair by the lower Mississippi valley tribes, for among the objects collected by Iberville during his exploration along "*la rivière du Mississippi en 1700*," and which were to be sent to the court of Versailles, were "some ugly perforated beads and a skein of buffalo wool dyed and spun by the natives."⁵

¹ Edgar Woods, *Albemarle County in Virginia*, Charlottesville, 1901, p. 22.

² *Jesuit Relations*, vol. 68, p. 133.

³ Du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, Eng. ed., London, 1763, vol. II, p. 163.

⁴ Dumont, *Mémoires Historiques sur la Louisiane*, Paris, 1753, vol. I, p. 154.

⁵ *New York State Library, Bulletin* 57, Sept., 1892, p. 335.

During the same year Iberville made his second journey northward, penetrating as far as the villages of the Taensa, a short distance above the Natchez. It is therefore highly probable that the "skein of buffalo wool" was obtained from either the Taensa or the Natchez.

Bearing on this question, Brackenridge wrote :

"It is curious to observe, that in the instruction to Iberville by the King of France, two things were considered of the first importance, the *pearl fishery*, and the *buffalo wool*. Charlevoix observes, that he is not surprised that the first should not have been attended to, but he thinks it strange that the second should be neglected even to his time."¹

When La Salle was at the village of the Taensa, during the year 1682, the women wore, in addition to other ornaments, "bracelets of woven hair."² These we may safely assume to have been braided bands, made in all probability of buffalo hair. Leg bands or garters were evidently made in a similar manner.

Adair,³ in referring to the Southern Indians, said :

"The Indian females continually wear a beaded string round their legs, made of buffalo hair which is a species of coarse wool : and they reckon it a great ornament."

The French officer Bossu, during his tour through the Southern country, wrote from "Among the Allibamons the 28th of April 1759," and described the duties of the women of the tribe "as preparing their husband's meals, dressing the skins, making shoes, spinning the wool of the wild oxen, and making little baskets in which they are very well skilled and industrious."⁴ About the same time (1759) the Alibamu were living in the vicinity of Alabama and Tallapoosa rivers, about the present Montgomery, Alabama. They did not remove westward until after the close of the French and Indian war in 1763.

Bossu's reference is of interest for several reasons : First, it serves as a connecting link between the tribes of Carolina and those

¹ Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana*, Pittsburgh, 1814, p. 57.

² Tonti, *An Account of Monsieur de la Salle's Last Expedition and Discoveries in North America*, London, 1698, p. 86.

³ Op. cit., p. 169.

⁴ Bossu, *Travels Through that Part of North America Called Louisiana*, London, 1771, vol. 1, p. 233.

whose villages were on the banks of the Mississippi; and again it probably marks the southern limit of the use of the hair or wool of the buffalo.

Evidently the buffalo did not enter the vast forests of pine that extended for many miles northward from the Gulf, from the Mississippi to the Atlantic. This belief is sustained by the narratives of the De Soto expedition of 1539-1542, for during their years of wandering through the Southern forests the Spaniards do not appear to have seen a single buffalo.

But bison appear to have been quite numerous a little farther northward until comparatively recent times. About 160 years after De Soto's journey, Lawson knew of buffalo in the southwestern part of Carolina, and as late as 1740 they were encountered and killed near Ocmulgee river in the present state of Georgia. This was during the expedition of Oglethorpe to the Creek towns.¹

It is a curious fact that north of the Ohio, especially in the states of Ohio and Indiana, the bones of the buffalo are seldom met with on the ancient village sites, although bones of other animals are often very numerous. This would make it appear that buffalo had reached that region at quite a recent day, as they were often killed by the early settlers.

There are, however, several references in early works which, if authentic, appear to allude to the use of buffalo hair by Indians at that time living within the present limits of Ohio.

In a work written nearly three centuries ago occurs this rather ambiguous statement:

"They have also made description of great heards of well growne beasts, that live about the parts of this Lake [*Erocoise*] such as the Christian world (untill this discovery) hath not bin acquainted with. These beasts are of the bignesse of a Cowe, there flesh being very good foode, their hides good lether, their fleeces very usefull, being a kinde of wolle as fine almost as the wolls of the Beaver, and the Salvages doe make garments thereof." ²

If this Lake *Erocoise* is really Lake Erie, as some suppose, we

¹ MS. Stow. 792, British Museum.

² Thomas Morton, *New English Canaan*, 1632, in *Force's Tracts*, vol. 1, p. 66, Washington, 1838.

then have a reference to the use of the hair by some tribe or tribes in the northern part of Ohio.

The following passage may likewise refer to the same general area :

“ Besides they use the hair or rather wool [of the buffalo] cut off their hides for garments and beds, and spin it into yarn, of which they make great bags, wherein they put the flesh they kill after they have cured it to bring it home to their houses ; for their huntings are from the latter end of autumn, when the cattle are fat, to the beginning of Spring.”¹

Now, as this was written early in the 18th century, the information may have been obtained from some earlier writings. It suggests the bags of the Kaskaskia mentioned by Père Marest in his letter to Père Germon, previously quoted.

From the numerous references quoted in the preceding pages, it appears evident that the hair or wool of the buffalo was extensively used by all the tribes living along the banks of the Mississippi, as well as by the Southern tribes occupying the territory extending from that river to the Atlantic coast.

The wool or hair was first spun or twisted into yarn preparatory to being braided into various articles. This native material was undoubtedly used until European wool was introduced by the traders, consequently the oldest Cherokee and Choctaw belts and bands, a few of which are preserved in our collections, should be considered as being purely aboriginal in all respects save the material. And some of the older examples, which we are likely to regard as being made of European wool, may actually be of buffalo wool, spun and dyed by the Indians.

It will be noticed that various references have been made to the use of red and yellow dyes by different tribes along the Mississippi, including the Illinois, Kaskaskia, Quapaw, and a tribe farther south — probably the Natchez or the Taensa. These colors, red and yellow, together with black, which is likewise mentioned as being used by the Kaskaskia, were probably the only native colors used by the Southern tribes. They are even now made by certain Indians

¹ Daniel Coxe, *A Description of the English Province of Carolana*. Reprinted in French, *Hist. Coll. La.*, 2d ed., pt. 11, 1850, p. 248.

in Louisiana, and utilized by them to color the material of which baskets are made.¹

II. — THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY AND WESTWARD

The Western Indians did not use buffalo hair to the same extent, or for the same purposes, as did those east of the Mississippi; nevertheless, it was utilized by many tribes.

Although we are not able to trace a single instance of its ceremonial use, or of its entering into any of the sacred dances enacted by the tribes east of the Mississippi, yet such use of the hair by the upper Missouri valley tribes has been recorded by various writers.

Mr James Mooney, during his studies among the Kiowa, procured a large body of data bearing on this interesting subject,² but unfortunately it has not yet been published.

In describing the costume of *Kani-Sachka*, or leader of the Okipě ceremony among the Mandan, Maximilian wrote :

“ His whole body is bedaubed with yellow, and on his forehead he has a wreath of bleached buffalo hair or wool hanging over the eyes.”³

What the true signification of the buffalo-hair wreath may have been is not known; but we may safely assume that it possessed a symbolic meaning.

Describing the dress of Númak-máhana in a certain Mandan ceremony, Curtis⁴ says :

“ . . . a wide band of brown buffalo-hair covering his forehead, collar and anklets of jack-rabbit skin, and a kilt of twisted strands of buffalo-hair completed his dress.”

Buffalo hair was likewise used by the Omaha in forming the dress worn by them in their Buffalo dance. A part of their costume has thus been described :

¹ See Bushnell, The Choctaw of Bayou Lacombe, Louisiana, *Bulletin 48, Bur. Am. Eth.*, 1909.

² Mr Mooney's material on the subject will be included in his forthcoming memoir on The Heraldic System of the Kiowa Indians, to be published by the Bureau of American Ethnology.

³ Maximilian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, London, 1843, p. 374.

⁴ E. S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, vol. v, 1909, p. 30.

"Each of four men used to put the skin of a buffalo head over his head, the horns standing up, and the hair of the buffalo head hanging down below the chest of the wearer. It was over his forehead, as well as down his back, but not over his eyes. He also wore a necklace of the hair that grows on the throat of a buffalo. Two Crows says that now some wear necklaces of *léhi*, that is, old hair, either of a bull or that of a cow, which has been shed."¹

In the Crazy dance of the Cheyenne, there were two leaders, "whose bodies and cheeks were painted with white clay, and whose ears were filled with hair shed by the buffalo, which was believed to confer strong 'medicine' powers."²

The buffalo, and likewise its hair, entered into many of the religious ceremonies and dances of the Plains tribes, and more especially of those who lived in the upper Missouri valley. The migratory habits of the buffalo, and the return of the vast herds, must have caused them to be regarded by the Indians with a certain degree of awe. Then again, many tribes relied on them for the principal supply of food, for their garments and utensils, and also for the material of which their dwellings were made; therefore it is easily understood why that animal holds such an important place in the mythology and ceremonies of the tribes of the plains.

Much information bearing on this important and interesting phase of the subject may be gathered from the forthcoming work on the Kiowa by Mr Mooney, as well as from the monographs of the different tribes by Edward S. Curtis.

Another peculiar use of the hair of the buffalo by the Plains tribes was their habit of attaching it to their own hair to cause the latter to appear the longer. This custom has been referred to by many travelers and writers.

"Though all the far western Indians wear their hair long, the Cumanche seems to take most pride in the voluminousness of his 'tresses,' and the length of his queue, which is sometimes eked out with buffalo or other hair, till its tip reaches the ground, and is bedaubed with gum, grease and paint, and decorated with beads and other gewgaws."³

¹ J. O. Dorsey, *Omaha Sociology*, *Third Rep. Bur. Am. Eth.*, p. 348.

² Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*, *Fourteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Eth.*, p. 1033.

³ Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, New York, 1844, vol. II, p. 311.

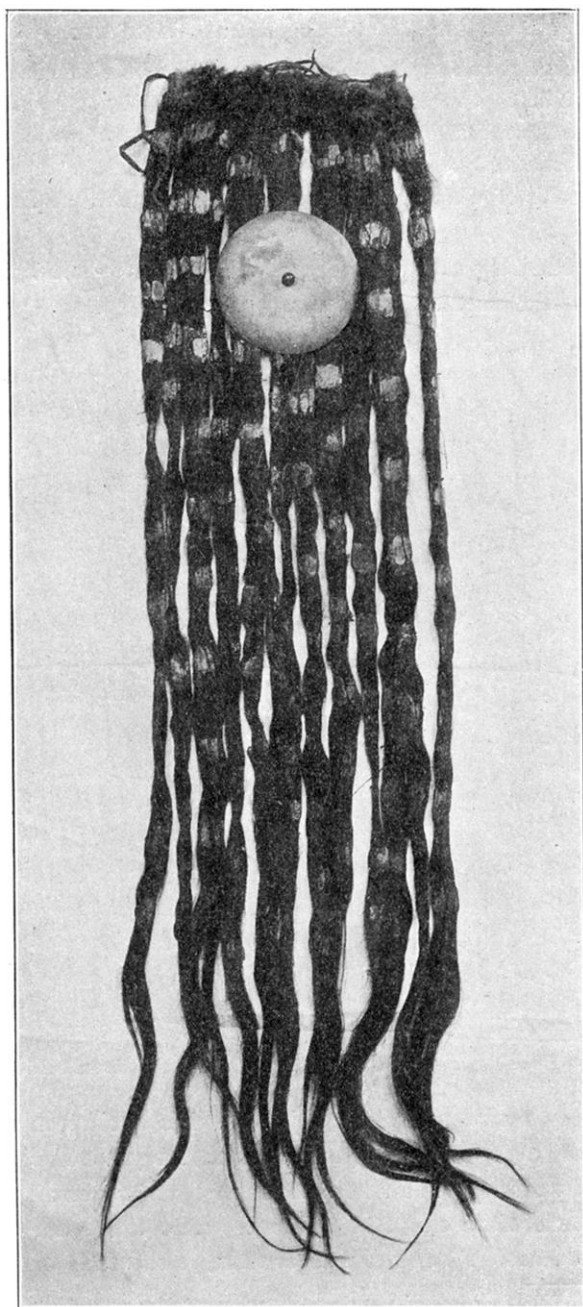


FIG. 76. — Head-dress of buffalo hair. (U. S. National Museum, No. 167,145.)

And again we find this rather general statement :

"The central and northern Plains tribes part their hair in the middle, and confine it in two long tails, one over, or just behind, each ear. These pieced out with buffalo or horse hair to make them longer, are wrapped with a long and narrow piece of cloth, or beaver skin, cut in strips, the folds of which furnish receptacles of which the Indians make great use."¹

An excessively rare head-dress formed of buffalo hair is preserved in the United States National Museum (no. 167,145). It is

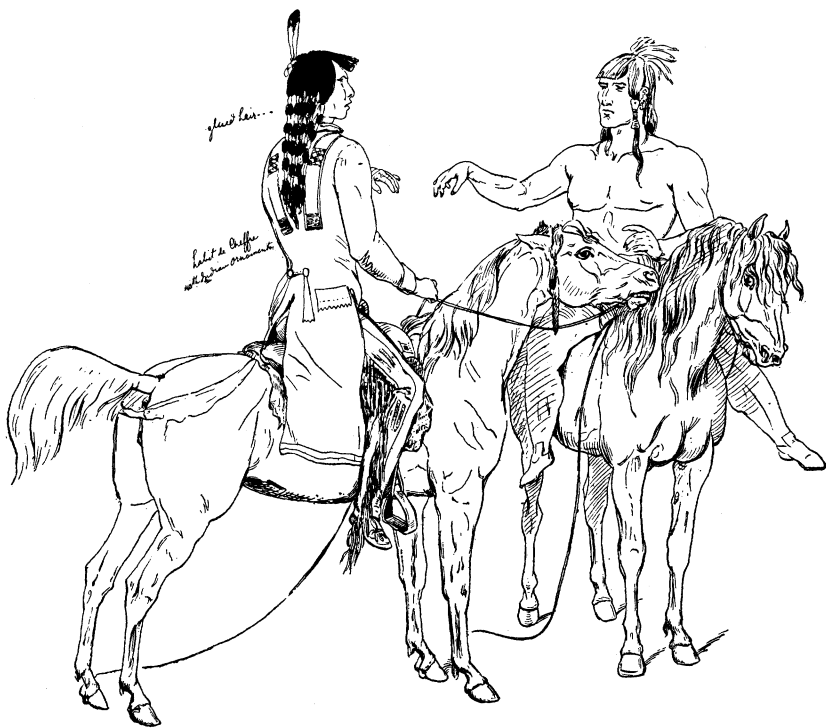


FIG. 77. — Drawing by Friedrich Kurz, 1851, showing Hidatsa head-dress.

represented in figure 76. This object consists of thirteen strands of hair, each of which is about 32 inches in length. Each strand is formed of a quantity of hair held together by many small masses of gum, to which white clay still adheres. The thirteen strands are attached to a narrow band of beaver skin, to the ends of which are

¹ Col. R. I. Dodge, *Our Wild Indians*, Hartford, 1882, p. 304.

fastened narrow thongs: these probably served to secure it to the head of the wearer. A metal disk, four inches in diameter, serves as an additional ornament, being attached near the top of the head-

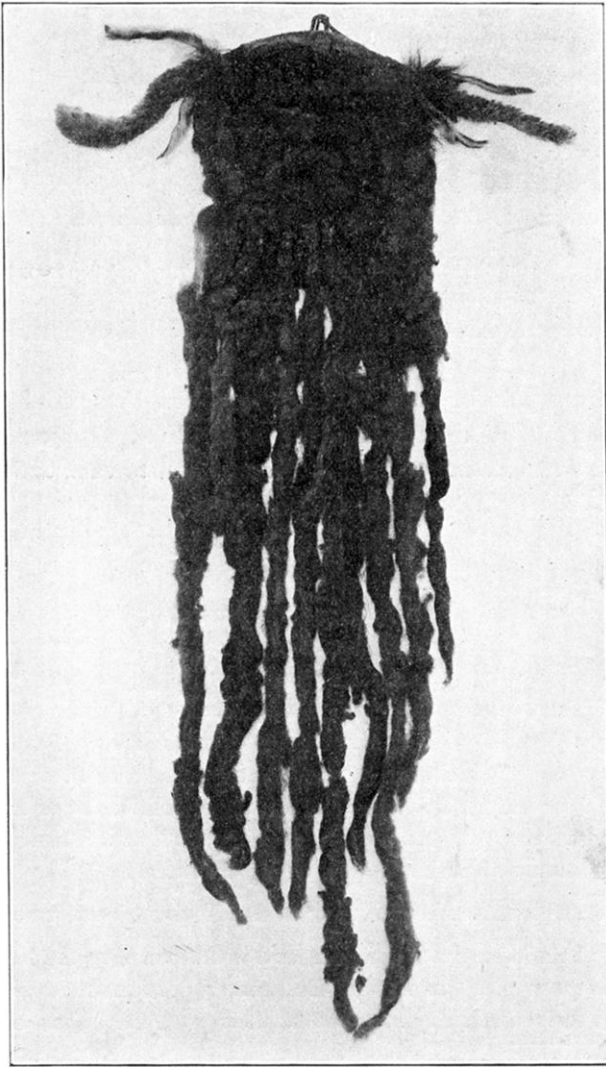


FIG. 78. — Shoshoni head-dress of buffalo hair. Collected on the Wind River reservation, Wyoming, 1901; now in the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

dress. It is to be regretted that nothing definite is known concerning the history of this specimen.

The resemblance between this head-dress and that worn by one of the horsemen shown in figure 77 is quite remarkable. This sketch, by the Swiss artist Friedrich Kurz, was made at the Hidatsa village at Fort Berthold, on the upper Missouri, in July, 1851.¹ On August 1 of that year Kurz entered in his journal :

“ The men in this village [at Fort Berthold] devote more attention to ornaments and fine appearance than the girls ; the former devote especial care to their hair, and even attach borrowed hair to their own in long streamers ; but this is done only by men who count ‘ coup.’ ”

A somewhat similar example was obtained from the Shoshoni on the Wind River reservation, Wyoming, in 1901 (fig. 78), and is now in the American Museum of Natural History, New York City (no. 50-2344). It is formed of numerous cords of buffalo wool, held together by a peculiar gum. The extreme length is about 26 inches, while the width of the top is 6 ½ inches. The long strands of wool are attached to a narrow band of beaver skin, to each end of which is fastened a tuft of buffalo hair dyed red.

Writing of the Western tribes in general, but of the “ Shiennes ” (Cheyenne) in particular, it was said :

“ They even regard long hair as an ornament ; and many wear false hair fastened to their own by means of an earthy matter, resembling red clay, and depending, in many instances, particularly in the young beaux, to their knees, in the form of queues, one on each side of the head, variously decorated with ribbon-like slips of red and blue cloth, or coloured skin. Others, and by no means an inconsiderable few, had collected their long hair into several flat masses of the breadth of two or three fingers, and less than the fifth of an inch in thickness, each one separately annulated with red clay, at regular intervals.”²

The same author, in referring to the Teton Sioux, wrote :

“ The hair is in great profusion, and is thrown upon the back in long rolls, but upon close inspection the greater portion of it is perceived to be false hair artificially attached to their own, the points of junction

¹ Other sketches by this artist appear in vol. 10, no. 1, of this journal.

² Edwin James, *An Account of an Expedition* (By Maj. Stephen H. Long), Philadelphia, 1823, vol. 11, p. 180.

being indicated by small masses of clay with which the attachment is effected."

Maximilian wrote of the Minnetaree, or Hidatsa, near Fort Berthold, the same as described by Kurz :

"They wear their hair in long flat braids, hanging down upon the back like the Mandans ; sometimes it is plastered over with clay, and not unfrequently lengthened by gluing false locks to it." ¹

And in another place he said :

"They [the Mandan] encourage the growth of their hair, and often lengthen it by artificial means." ²

The same custom was observed among the Arikara, by whom the separate locks of hair were held together by "a substance resembling putty." ³

But it remained for Catlin to suggest a plausible explanation of the reason for this peculiar custom of lengthening the hair. He says :

"It is a common custom amongst most of these upper tribes, to splice or add on several lengths of hair, by fastening them with glue ; probably for the purpose of imitating the Crows, upon whom alone Nature has bestowed this conspicuous and signal ornament." ⁴

Another method of dressing the hair was to arrange it in a single long braid, often artificially lengthened and decorated with metal disks or other objects. Describing the Sioux at Fort Pierre, Maximilian ⁵ said :

"These Indians let their hair grow as long as possible, and plait it behind in a long tail, which is ornamented with round pieces of brass, and often hangs down to a great length."

Again, we find other tribes following the same practice :

"The Comanches and Kiowas comb the hair back from the face and plait it, with additions, in a single long tail, ornamented with silver or plated buckles, and often reaching nearly to the ground." ⁶

¹ Maximilian, op. cit., p. 396.

² Ibid., p. 336.

³ Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana*, Pittsburgh, 1814, p. 252.

⁴ Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indians*, Phila., 1860, p. 92.

⁵ Op. cit., p. 158.

⁶ Dodge, *Our Wild Indians*, Hartford, 1882, p. 304.

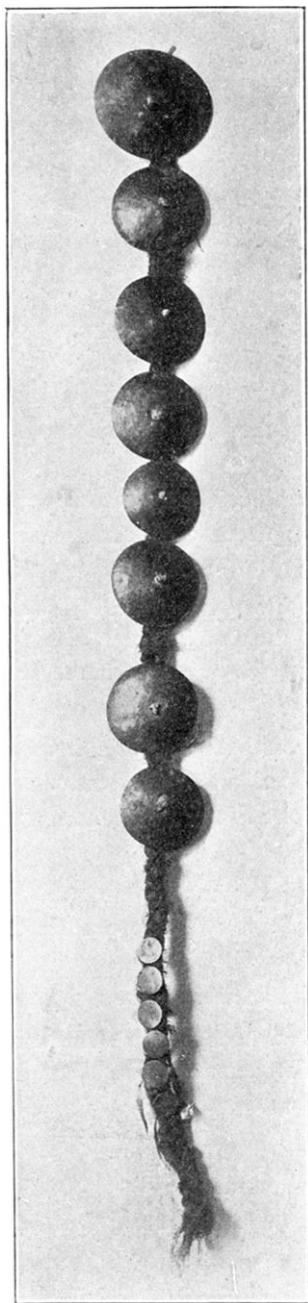


FIG. 79. — Buffalo-hair head-dress in the U. S. National Museum.

Fortunately a specimen (fig. 79) answering this description perfectly is preserved in the National Museum. It is marked "Ta-a-wash Indians, Green River, Capt. Gunnison 1879." The extreme length of the piece is about 37 inches. It is made of buffalo hair, tightly plaited. Attached to it are eight german-silver disks, and near the lower end are six old-style army buttons. No other example of this type of head-dress can be traced.

Capt. Jonathan Carver¹ mentions silver ornaments as used by the Sioux women on their hair. Beltrami,² likewise speaking of the Sioux, alludes to "paste buckles" attached to their hair. These are described as having been obtained from traders; but in all probability he saw only the small masses of clay or gum already mentioned.

Quite an interesting reference, probably to the Indians of the upper Mississippi valley, is found in that little-known work by D'Eres,³ which reads:

"The hair is plucked from the head, except a small portion on the back part the bigness of a man's hand; the hair thus left on is permitted to grow to

¹ *Travels in North America*, Phila., 1796, p. 147.

² *A Pilgrimage in Europe and America*, London, 1828, vol. II, p. 182.

³ Charles D. R. D'Eres, *Memoirs*, Exeter, N. H., 1800, p. 98.



CHEYENNE HEAD ORNAMENT OF BUFFALO HAIR

(U. S. National Museum, No. 165,948)

a great length, and ornamented with silver broaches and feathers of various colours, from the crown of the head to the extremity of the hair."

An exceedingly interesting head ornament in the National Museum (no. 165,948) is shown in plate XIX. It was collected among the Cheyenne, and is formed of a bunch of buffalo hair in natural color and a tuft of eagle down dyed green. The thong attached to the down is not dyed, but the larger one, binding the hair, is colored red. A small bag of "medicine" forms part of the ornament and is visible near the top of the specimen. The extreme length is about ten inches. Unfortunately nothing definite is known of the source of this rare piece.

Halters and reatas were made of twisted cords of buffalo hair. They were evidently made and used by all the tribes of the plains. Catlin,¹ writing of the tribes in general, says :

"The hair from the head and shoulders [of the buffalo], which is long, is twisted and braided into halters."

The Pawnee,² and likewise the Shoshoni,³ made halters of buffalo hair. And farther north the same custom was followed, for it is stated :

"The Assiniboin, Rapid Indians [Atsina], Blackfeet and Mandans, together with all the other Indians who inhabit a plain country always perform their journeys on horseback . . . They do not often use bridles but guide their horses with halters made of ropes which are manufactured from the hair of the buffaloe which are very strong and durable." ⁴

Several such halters are in the National Museum. One example, made by the Comanche and collected by Dr E. Palmer at Ft Cobb, Indian Territory, in 1865 (no. 6922), is illustrated in figure 80. This is an unusually heavy piece, being composed of four cords, each of which is formed of two twisted strands. Many similar though lighter ones are in the collection, including a "hair rope" from New Mexico, collected by Lieut. A. W. Whipple (no. 1442). This is composed of six cords, each of two strands ; it is thirteen feet in length, but quite thin.

¹ Op. cit., p. 399.

² J. T. Irving, *Indian Sketches*, Phila., 1835, vol. II, p. 156.

³ *Original Journals of Lewis and Clark*, New York, 1905, vol. III, pp. 30, 31.

⁴ D. W. Harmon, *Journal*, Andover, 1820, p. 336.

An example collected from the Oto of Nebraska by J. W. Griest (no. 22,448), is braided square (sinnet); its length is about fourteen feet. In addition there are several small but quite long cords in the collection.

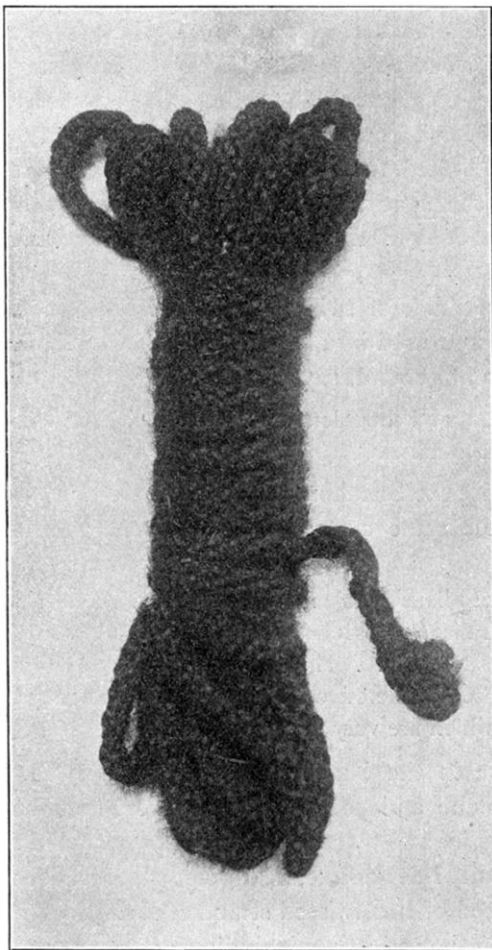


FIG. 80. — Comanche halter of buffalo hair. (U. S. National Museum, No. 6922.)

Blankets also appear to have been made of buffalo hair or wool. Writing of the Osage and neighboring tribes, Hunter says :

“The hair of the buffalo and other animals is sometimes manufactured into blankets; the hair is first twisted by hand and wound into balls.”¹

This agrees with a description of the work of an old man among the Arikara, written in 1811 :

“I was told one day, of an old Indian who was making a blanket; I immediately went to see him. To my surprise, I found an old man, perfectly blind, seated on a stool before a kind of frame, near which were drawn coarse threads, or rather twists of buffaloe wool, mixed with wolf’s

hair; he had already made about a quarter of a yard of a very coarse, rough cloth. He told me that it was the first he had attempted and that it was in consequence of a dream, in which he thought he had made a

¹ John D. Hunter, *Memoir of a Captivity*, London, 1824, p. 289.

blanket like those of the white people. Here are the rudiments of weaving.”¹

Although it is not improbable that this was the first attempt of that particular individual to make a blanket, it is difficult to believe it to have been the first effort by a member of the Arikara tribe, although, of course, tanned buffalo hides served the purpose of blankets among all the Indians of the plains.

A rare old blanket from the Wilkes collection, probably made by the Nez Percés, and now in the National Museum (2124), is formed partly of a brown hair, which is evidently buffalo.

Another example of old blanket, in the same collection, formed part of a Cheyenne scaffold burial. It is made in part of a brown wool which appears to be that of buffalo. There is little doubt that the blanket was made by Indians.

One of the earliest reference we have to the use of buffalo hair alludes to the making of rug-blankets, but whether made by Spaniards or Indians it is difficult to say. It is found in Benavides' *Memorial*, written in 1630:

“The hair [*pelo*] is not like that of our cattle but curly like very fine fleece. Of it are made very good rugs.”²

During the winter months the Northern Indians would place a quantity of buffalo hair in their moccasins to add warmth.³ Other tribes made similar use of moose or caribou hair.⁴ Something of the same nature was mentioned by Radisson⁵ as early as 1661 or 1662, near Lake Superior.

Buffalo hair was also used by the Sioux and other plains tribes to stuff balls and dolls for the children. Many examples of these are in the National Museum. Catlin, referring to the Mandan, mentions “their fine white saddle of doe's-skin, which is wadded with buffalo's hair.”⁶ A bunch of buffalo hair also served as a brush for applying paint in certain ceremonies among the Teton Sioux.⁷

¹ Brackenridge, op. cit., p. 253.

² In *Land of Sunshine*, Los Angeles, 1901, p. 43.

³ D. W. Harmon, op. cit., p. 416.

⁴ Alex. Mackenzie, *Voyage from Montreal in the Years 1789-1793*, New York, 1802, p. 85.

⁵ Peter Esprit Radisson, *Voyages*, Prince Society, Boston, 1885, p. 212.

⁶ Catlin, op. cit., p. 186.

⁷ Edward S. Curtis, *North American Indian*, 111, 1908.

When the early Spanish explorers first entered the plains of the Southwest, they marveled at the vast herds of buffalo which they encountered in their marches, and from the natives they learned to what extent the buffalo served them in supplying the many necessities of life. In one early narration it is written :

“ The Riches of Quivira consist in their Oxen, whose Flesh is the ordinary Food of the Inhabitants, their Skins serve them for cloathing, their Hair for Thred, of their Nerves and Sinews they make cords and Bow-strings ; of their Bones they make Nails and Bodkins ; of their Horn, Trumpets ; of their Bladders, Vessels to keep water in, and their dung when dried serves for fire.” ¹

A like account is given with reference to the Tonkawa Indians of Texas :

“ Beside their meat, it [the buffalo] furnished them liberally what they desire for conveniences. The brains are used to soften skins, the horns for spoons and drinking cups, the shoulder-blades for *casas* [houses?] and to clear the ground, the tendons for thread and bow-strings, the hoof to glue the arrow-feathering. From the tail-hair they make ropes and girths ; from the wool, belts and various ornaments. The hide furnishes saddle and bridle, tether ropes, shields, tents, shirts, footwear, and blankets to protect from the cold.” ²

A similar description is found in Gomara's history ; and in the *Relación Postrera de Sivola*,⁴ written in 1541, occurs another account of the buffalo and of its great value to the natives. Among the various uses to which they put the different parts of the animal it was stated that : “ With the skins they make their houses, with the skins they clothe and shoe themselves, of the skins they make rope, and also of the wool.” . . . Here we have the earliest reference to the ropes or reatas which, as has already been shown, were probably used by all the Western tribes.

The various references and quotations brought together in the

¹ Robt. Morden, *Geography Rectified, or a Description of the World*, 3d ed., London, 1693, p. 586.

² Mezières MS., ca. 1770-78, cited by Dr Herbert E. Bolton of the University of Texas.

³ Hakluyt, *Voyages*, vol. III, London, 1600, p. 382.

⁴ Winship, The Coronado Expedition, 1540-1542, *Fourteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Eth.*, p. 570.

preceding pages will suffice to show how universal was the use of the hair or wool of the *Bison americanus* among the native tribes of North America. Many references to the different uses of the hair by the widely separated tribes have undoubtedly been overlooked, but enough has been said to show that it was evidently utilized for one purpose or another by a majority of the tribes from the Atlantic coast to the Rocky mountains.

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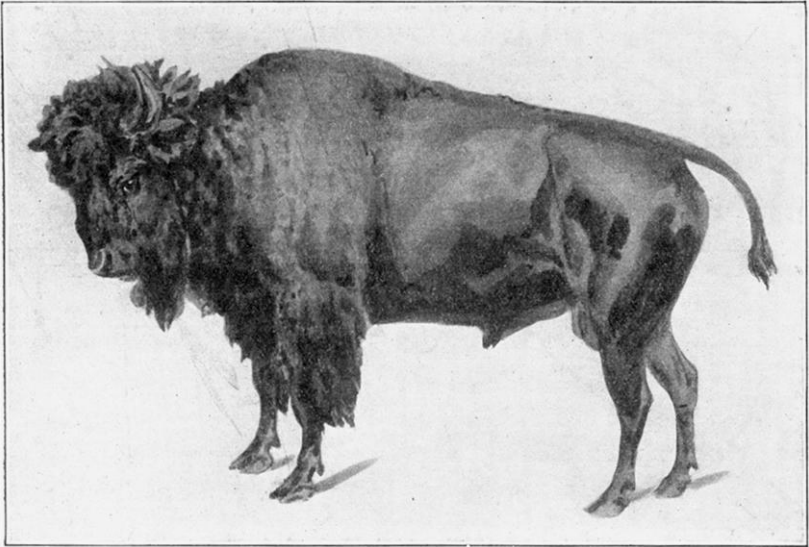


FIG. 81. — Buffalo, from an unpublished drawing by Friedrich Kurz.